

Choosing a Recreational Camp for Your Child:

Questions and Answers For Parents (Published by the Department of Public Health)

Attending camp should be a wonderful experience for your child. To help ensure this, it is essential that a camp provide a safe and healthy environment for campers and staff. Please read the following information. The Department of Public Health hopes that it will be useful in helping you make a decision about a camp for your child.

Q. What is a recreational camp for children?

A. It is a day or residential (overnight), sports, travel, or primitive program that offers recreational activities and instruction to campers. A camp has five or more children and typically runs anytime between June 1 and September 30 and/or during school vacations. Please note that there are certain factors such as, length of time the camp runs and who operates a camp, that influence whether or not a program is considered a camp. A program that calls or advertises itself as a “camp,” is a camp. If you would like further details on what a recreational camp is, please call your local board of health.

Q. Do recreational camps for children have to be licensed?

A. Yes. In Massachusetts, a camp must be inspected and licensed by the local board of health in the city or town where the camp is located. In order to be licensed, the camp must meet regulations developed by the Department of Public Health, and any additional local rules. The regulations set up minimum standards for health and safety at a camp. Call the Board of Health in the town where the camp is located to find out about the status of a camp’s license and to obtain a copy of the most recent inspection report.

Q. What does the board of health look for during an inspection?

A. Overall, the inspector will make sure that the camp provides an appropriate environment for the safety and well being of the campers. The inspector will look to see that the camp has, for example: safe structures and equipment; adequate sanitary facilities; sufficient supervision of the campers; appropriate plans in case of medical emergencies, natural and other physical disasters; sufficient health care coverage; and injury and fire prevention plans. There are other policies and items that must be checked by an inspector. Call your local board of health to find out what they are. Ask a camp representative to let you see copies of any of the required plans and procedures.

Q. How do I know if the camp counselors are qualified?

A. All counselors are required to have at least four weeks experience in a supervisory role with children or four weeks experience with group camping. Counselors must also complete an orientation program before campers arrive at camp. Any counselor who supervises children in activities such as horseback riding, hiking, swimming and other events must have appropriate specialized training, certification and experience in the activity. Ask to see proof that a counselor is certified in a particular activity.

Q. Is the camp required to check the background of camp staff?

A. Yes. For all camp staff and all volunteers, the camp must look at the person’s background and qualifications to make sure the individual is appropriate to work with children. To do this, the camp must look into the person’s previous work history and confirm three positive references. Also, camps are required to check the proposed staff person’s and volunteer’s criminal history, if it is available, to ensure that s/he has not committed a crime that would keep the individual from being a counselor. As a parent, it is important that you find out if the camp reviews all of this information. To find out, ask the camp director and request a copy of the camp’s written policy on staff background checks. Please note however, that you are not authorized to review the staff person’s actual criminal history record.

Q. How old do camp counselors have to be?

A. There are different age requirements depending on the type of camp. A counselor working at a residential (overnight), sports, travel, trip or special needs camp must be 18 years of age or have graduated from high school. Counselors working at a day camp must be 16 years of age. All counselors at all camps are required to be at least three years older than the campers they supervise.

Q. Should the camp have a person on-site that knows first aid and CPR?

A. Yes. All camps are required to have an individual, called a health supervisor, at the camp at all times who is at least 18 years of age and currently certified in first aid and CPR. The camp must provide backup for the health care supervisor with a Massachusetts licensed physician, physician assistant or nurse who serves as a health care consultant. Special needs camps and residential camps where there is a large number of campers and staff, must have a licensed health care provider, such as, a physician or nurse on-site.

Q. How will a camp be responsible for my child's medication?

A. The camp is required to keep all medications in their original containers and to store all prescription medications in a locked cabinet. If your child will be participating in an off-site field trip and will require prescription medication, a second original pharmacy container will need to be provided. The only individuals authorized to give your child his/her medication is a licensed health care professional or the camp health supervisor under the oversight of the camp health care consultant; however, other arrangements may be made for emergency medications such as for epi-pens and inhalers. When your child returns from camp, the medication must be returned to the parent or guardian, if possible or, destroyed.

Q. Can a camp discipline my child?

A. Yes. A camp must have a written disciplinary policy that explains their methods of appropriate discipline e.g. "time-out" from activities, sending a child to the Camp Director's office, etc. Under no circumstance may a camper be punished by corporal punishment, such as spanking, nor punished by denying food, or subjecting a camper to verbal abuse or humiliation. Camp staff must be familiar with and follow the camp discipline policy.

Q. What action does a camp have to take to protect my child from abuse and neglect?

A. It is a requirement that all camps have procedures in place to protect campers from abuse and neglect while at camp. Ask a camp representative for specific information on their prevention steps as well as their procedure for reporting a suspected incident. In order to protect your child from possible abuse, you should talk openly and frequently with him/her about how to keep safe from adults and other children; you should not rely solely on the camp organization. For guidance on abuse prevention and counseling regarding a possible abuse situation, please contact the Department of Social Services' Child-At-Risk Hotline at 1-800-792-5200.

Tips: Do not rely on glossy pictures and slick brochures -

- Contact the camp director to schedule an appointment for an informational meeting and tour of the facility.
- Ask the camp for a copy of their policies regarding staff background checks, health care and camper discipline. Ask to also see a copy of the procedures for filing grievances with the camp.
- Call the local board of health in the town where the camp is located for information regarding inspections of the camp and to inquire about the camp's license status.
- Obtain names of other families who have sent their children to the camp and contact them.

If you would like a copy of the state regulations concerning recreational camps for children, please visit, www.state.ma.us/dph/dcs or, call the Department of Public Health, Division of Community Sanitation, at (617) 983-6762.